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ABSTRACT

As part of the mandate of the Alberta Government's Student Evaluation Branch to monitor changes in student achievement, the Humanities Diploma Examinations Unit compared the written work from 1984 and the 1990 English 30, Social Studies 30, and English 33 Canadian provincial diploma examinations. Full-length essays written by over 30,000 students in 1984 and a similar number in 1990 were scored according to a criterion-referenced scoring guide that described features of writing performance in 5-point scales covering several dimensions: thought and detail, organization, style, and correctness of language. Comparisons were made using two standards: "satisfactory," which represented work at an acceptable level for graduating students; and "excellent," which represented outstanding work for graduating students. Results indicated that: (1) papers judged to be satisfactory were significantly better in all three subjects in 1990 than in 1984; (2) improvements were noted as well in the papers scored "excellent"; (3) changes were particularly dramatic in the English 30 1990 essays; and (4) the descriptions of students' written work in all three subjects revealed common features of writing at the mid and top levels of performance. Results document an increase in standards (particularly at the "satisfactory" level) as well as improvements in actual student performance. (Six tables presenting key features of student essays are included; an appendix of data and the written-response assignments for 1984 and 1990 are attached.) (RS)

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PATTERNS & PROCESSES:

APPROACHES TO WRITING BY GRADE 12 STUDENTS

by

Elana J. Scraba

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ABSTRACT

PATTERNS AND PROCESSES: APPROACHES TO WRITING BY GRADE 12 STUDENTS

The Study

As part of the mandate of the Alberta Government's Student Evaluation Branch to monitor changes in student achievement over time, the Humanities Diploma Examinations Unit undertook in July 1990 a comparison of written work from the 1984 and 1990 English 30, Social Studies 30, and English 33 provincial diploma examinations.

Comparisons were made at two standards: *Satisfactory* (3), which represents work at an acceptable level for students seeking graduation after 12 years of schooling; and *Excellent* (5), which represents outstanding work for graduating students.

Results

The level of expectations embedded in the scoring criteria has increased substantially since 1984. Teacher-readers agreed that papers judged to be *Satisfactory* (3) were significantly better in all three subjects in 1990 than in 1984. Improvements were noted as well in the papers scored *Excellent* (5). Changes were particularly dramatic in the English 30 papers.

Patterns of Thought

In addition to discovering changes in the standards for evaluating student writing and improvements in students' performance, the teacher-readers identified recurring characteristics and patterns of approach in the students' writing. The descriptions of students' written work in all three subjects revealed common features of writing at the mid and top levels of performance. This discovery was not anticipated in the study design. The remarkable cross-subject parallelism should provide useful information to teachers of writing in any subject area.

Conclusions

The study documented an increase in standards, particularly at the *Satisfactory* (3) level, between 1984 and 1990 in all three subjects. As well, it documented improvements in actual student performance. Such changes confirm the importance of studying trends in student achievement.

Of particular importance to teachers are the detailed observations about characteristics of the students' work. Specific information about how students approach a topic, put ideas together, and use language will be very useful to teachers in their instructional planning.

Discussion

Several factors may be contributing to the improvement in student writing. First, teaching practices may have changed. The introduction of provincial diploma examinations has provided many direct and indirect inservice benefits to the province's teachers as they have become involved in examination development, field testing, and marking. The exchange of ideas and information amongst teachers has helped them in their instructional planning and in their work with students. Certainly, students in 1990 write more frequently in all grades and in all subjects than they did in 1984.

Students' motivation may also have changed. Increasing pressures for higher marks from postsecondary institutions and employers may have encouraged some students to apply themselves throughout high school. As a result, students may be both better prepared and more serious in their approach to their studies and to the examinations.

Finally, the nature of the written-response assignments on recent examinations has changed, perhaps allowing students more scope to demonstrate their writing abilities. Writing assignments are less prescriptive, and students have greater freedom (and responsibility) in structuring their responses. Teacher-readers concurred that some of the features of the 1984 writing tasks may have contributed to the mechanical writing on those papers. However, the differences in quality of work between 1984 and 1990 are too great to have been caused by just the assignment.

The change in students' performance may have been reinforced, especially in social studies, by changes in the world. It is possible that recent world events have created a climate that discourages absolutes and instead encourages students to reflect more thoughtfully on the assignments and on their own ideas. It seems clear that excellence in classroom instruction has led more students to develop their abilities to express worthwhile ideas in clearly and correctly written prose.

PATTERNS AND PROCESSES: APPROACHES TO WRITING BY GRADE 12 STUDENTS

In June 1983, the Alberta Government announced the reintroduction of compulsory school-leaving examinations in core subjects. The first of these new Diploma Examinations were written in January 1984 by students seeking credit in examination subjects.

Marks from diploma examinations count as 50% of a student's final grade, with the remaining 50% coming from the student's school-awarded mark. Examinations of parallel difficulty are administered every January, June, and August. Annual information bulletins for diploma examination subjects announce changes in examination design, emphasis, standards, or scoring criteria and include sample questions, assignments, and scoring guides. These information bulletins are mailed to schools each September so that teachers *and students* will be well informed about the examinations planned for that school year. The January and June examinations are released for public use following administration.

All diploma examinations have a written-response component. In the subjects under study (English 30, Social Studies 30, and English 33), at least one full-length essay is required in a written-response section that contributes 50% of the examination mark in English and 30% in Social Studies.

Students' written work is scored according to criterion-referenced scoring guides that describe features of writing performance in five-point scales covering several dimensions: Thought and Detail, Organization, Style, and Correctness of Language. Papers are scored centrally in a carefully monitored setting. Each paper receives three independent readings by trained teacher-markers who represent all regions of the province in proportion to the numbers of papers from each region. If there is a degree of disagreement among the first three markers such that the student's final mark would be affected by 1% or more, the paper receives a fourth reading in the areas of disagreement. Students may appeal their marks; marks awarded after appeal stand.

One of the mandates of the Diploma Examinations Program is to track changes in student achievement over time. Students' writing performance has been of particular interest to educators and to the public since the beginning of the program. By the early 1980s, there was a widespread belief that the writing skills of high school graduates had declined significantly. As a consequence of this interest in how well students write, the Humanities Diploma Examinations staff of the Student Evaluation Branch initiated two studies: a quantitative study that compared 1984 writing with 1987 writing in English 30 and English 33, and 1984 writing with 1988 writing in Social Studies 30; and a qualitative study that compared 1984 writing with 1990 writing in English 30, Social Studies 30, and English 33. The first

study (quantitative) led to the second, which is the subject of this paper.

The 1987 (1988) Study

The 1987 (or 1988 for Social Studies 30) study was a test of the study design for measuring achievement over time as well as a comparison of the June 1987 (1988) written-response examination results with results from June 1984. The study posed three questions:

i. Were 1984 and 1987 (1988) marking standards comparable?
ii. Were 1984 and 1987 (1988) achievement levels in writing comparable?
iii. Were markers consistent and reliable in awarding scores?

Randomly selected students in 1987 (1988) wrote the 1984 examination just before writing the 1987 (1988) examination. These papers were mixed with randomly selected examinations written in 1984, and all were then scored by experienced markers. Markers used the 1987 (1988) scoring criteria, which represented a slight increase in standard in English 30 and minor changes in format and wording in English 33 and Social Studies 30.

The study showed extremely high marker reliability and consistency. In English 30, the study clearly showed a small but statistically significant "real" improvement in writing performance and an unchanged standard of expectation. Results for English 33 in

1987 and Social Studies 30 in 1988 were less clear, perhaps because of assignment changes or because of changing attitudes of markers.

The study design proved to be problematic for several reasons:

i. It could not account for the significant variable of change in writing topic despite the control of having 1987 (1988) students write the 1984 topics.

ii. Markers found it extremely frustrating to assess the 1984 topic using 1987 (1988) scoring criteria because they were uncertain about how much the 1984 topic itself was a problem (true in all three subjects).

iii. Having students write an outdated topic just days before they were to write the current examination is a questionable practice and, as such, bothered the markers and Student Evaluation Branch staff.

iv. Numerical results provide little useful information for classroom teachers regarding instruction.

v. The writing populations changed significantly[1] in English 30 and English 33 between 1984 and 1987.

vi. Current affairs references on the 1984 social studies assignment written by students in 1988 interfered with the "double-blind" feature of the study.

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[1] Total population writing English 30 in 1984: 20,065
Total population writing English 30 in 1987: 22,091
Total population writing English 33 in 1984: 10,820
Total population writing English 33 in 1987: 9,725

All these variables contaminated the data and reduced confidence in the numbers. After the Social Studies 30 replication in 1988 of the 1987 English study, Student Evaluation Branch staff concluded that another design for assessing changes in writing performance over time was needed.

The 1990 Study

General Description

This study was a qualitative or descriptive study that required teacher-readers to describe *features* of students' writing in 1984 and 1990. Separate studies using identical procedures were conducted in English 30, Social Studies 30, and English 33. The study required the teacher-readers to take a research or "reader-as-observer" stance toward the papers that they read, rather than the usual evaluative or "reader-as-assessor" stance of teacher-marker. No attempt was made to re-score papers; rather, teacher-readers described features of 1984 and 1990 writing in three general categories:

Thoughtfulness

- Completeness or breadth of thought
- Depth of thought
- Significance and complexity of content
- Consistency of thought and treatment of content

Effectiveness

- Control of the task
- Coherence
- Clarity of expression
- Tone, writer's voice

Correctness

- Accuracy of content (e.g., literary interpretation in English 30; historical, political, or economic information in Social Studies 30; and understanding of the literary selection in English 33)
- Control of conventions of language: spelling, punctuation, language (grammar, vocabulary), sentence construction

In each subject, the Thoughtfulness category was framed by the curricular expectations for understanding and articulation of course content. In English 30, for example, the examination requires a discussion of literature (selected by the student from literature studied) within the context of the given topic. The English 30 teacher-readers described "thoughtfulness" with respect to how the students discussed literature. Similarly, Social Studies 30 requires discussion of political, historical, and/or economic theories and/or events in relationship to the stated topic. The social studies teacher-readers described "thoughtfulness" in terms of the extent to which, and the manner in which, students dealt with their chosen content.

Design Questions

The study sought to answer two questions:

i. Did students who wrote diploma examinations in June 1990 produce better compositions than did their 1984 counterparts?

ii. Have the standards of expectation for written responses at the *Satisfactory* (3)* and *Excellent* (5)* levels of performance changed since 1984?

* In each of the subjects studied, papers are scored on a five-point descriptive (criterion-referenced) scale for several features. The scale labels are: 1-Poor, 2-Limited, 3-Satisfactory, 4-Proficient, 5-Excellent.

Readers

A group of ten teachers in each subject reviewed the selected papers. All the teachers were experienced in and currently teaching the course. They were also experienced examination markers, and all had served as group leaders[2] in the June 1990 marking session completed just before the study began. Most of the teachers had served as group leaders in previous marking sessions, and many had also worked on the standards confirmation committees that review the standards governing each marking session. The ten teachers in each subject group represented all major regions of the province and came from a variety of school settings: urban, inner-city, suburban, rural.

Papers

Papers read in the study were selected at random from June 1984 and June 1990 papers that had received scores of *Satisfactory* (3) or *Excellent* (5) on all, or most, scoring categories. Random selection of papers from 1984 was possible because a sample of papers from each examination year is retained for research purposes.

Each set of *Satisfactory* (3) and *Excellent* (5) papers was duplicated for teacher-readers.

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[2] Group leaders for each marking session spend an additional full day of training. They confirm the standards illustrated by selected exemplar papers, chair small group discussions throughout the marking session, and assist staff with training markers. They also serve as fourth readers in situations of mark discrepancies.

Procedure

The same procedure was followed for each subject. Teacher-readers began by reading the sample of papers awarded uniform scores of *Satisfactory* (3) in June 1990. They then confirmed that the papers in the random sample were representative of papers they had scored as *Satisfactory* (3) in the June 1990 marking session, and that the randomly selected papers represented the standard for *Satisfactory* (3) that had governed the marking session. This confirmation of the standards was done by comparing selected papers to the exemplar paper that had governed the marking session. Working in pairs, and then discussing papers as a group, the teacher-readers described the papers for features of thoughtfulness, effectiveness, and correctness. An external recorder kept detailed notes of all discussions and confirmed the content of the notes with the teacher-readers throughout the process.

This procedure was repeated for the random sample of 1984 *Satisfactory* (3) papers. The teacher-readers then compared their descriptions of 1990 and 1984 *Satisfactory* (3) papers and drew conclusions. The same steps were followed in reviewing and describing the *Excellent* (5) papers from 1990 and 1984.

Results

The results for each subject follow in tables 1 to 6. Each comment is an attempt to describe features of what students writing at a particular level did in 1990 compared with students in 1984.[3] As well as providing descriptions of generalizable features of the students' writing, the tables illustrate the standard that teachers agreed represented appropriate expectations for writing in 1990 or 1984.

It is important to keep in mind that for some students, achieving a Satisfactory *(3) level of performance is a great accomplishment.* For others, that level of achievement is only the beginning of what is possible.

It is also important for readers to be aware that the work described at each level met the *standard* established for that 1990 or 1984 marking session. Readers will note that the level of expectation in each subject was more demanding in 1990 than it was in 1984.

The problem of finding precise language to describe and clarify features of students' work in a constructive manner was identified by the teacher-readers as an issue for further research and study. The wording in the tables comes directly from the record of teachers' descriptions.

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[3] See Appendix A, Summary of Written-Response Results, 1984 and 1990; and Appendix B, Written-Response Assignments, 1984 and 1990

Table 1

Satisfactory (3) Papers in English 30*

Key Features of 1990 Satisfactory (3) Papers	Key Features of 1984 Satisfactory (3) Papers
Thoughtfulness •Attempt to develop a central idea •Straightforward interpretation at the literal level of the literature, OR skewed interpretations that emphasize "odd" elements •Glimmers of insight that are not developed •Generally accurate detail, sometimes manipulated to fit thesis •Recognize author's purpose but demonstrate a weak understanding •View issues in black and white or absolute terms •Didactic, generalized	**Thoughtfulness** •Superficial and vague •General, global statements often unsupported by detail •Skewed literary interpretations •No ownership of idea •Lack focus or unifying idea •Restate, retell •Generalized and superficial literal interpretation of literature •Judgmental •Little detail, or •Detail often incorrect and not developed
Effectiveness •Well organized in a simple, direct, and mechanical manner. Meaning is clear •Mechanical transitions •Either well-structured paragraphs and weak overall organization, or strong organization but weak paragraphing •Simple but clear. No confusion •Confident tone but no voice •Didactic – often "preachy" •Overgeneralized, imprecise, inflated diction	**Effectiveness** •Ordered but without focus or controlling idea •Few linkages between sections •Few connections between ideas •Mechanically structured with weak introductions •Widespread use of first person but with no sense of voice. Writing is impersonal •Confident tone •Tedious, elementary, and diffuse •Underdeveloped or few details •Imprecise diction
Correctness *Content* •Narrow but correct interpretation •More or less accurate but key details omitted if not in line with thesis *Conventions* •Correct but unsophisticated •Readable, relatively simple sentences and syntax •Vocabulary misused in attempt to impress •Redundancies •Correct punctuation •Problems with pronouns	**Correctness** *Content* •Interpretations border on the inaccurate because they deal only with surface features and do not develop these with respect to the topic *Conventions* •Convoluted sentences, comma splices, pronoun confusion •Simple but correct vocabulary; clichés, slang, and jargon are common

*The 1990 Satisfactory (3) papers were noticeably better, particularly in coherence and clarity, than the 1984 Satisfactory (3) papers, despite more demanding standards in 1990.

Table 2

Satisfactory (3) Papers in Social Studies 30*

Key Features of 1990 Satisfactory (3) Papers	Key Features of 1984 Satisfactory (3) Papers
Thoughtfulness (Ideas/Content) •Some strong elements combined with weak elements •Inconsistent insight – flashes of insight not sustained •Interpretations – superficial and/or underdeveloped •Address the issue. Focused •Acknowledge the issue but not its subtleties •Attempt explanations but ideas are underdeveloped with little elaboration, OR development is inconsistent •Facts recalled and used in support but not internalized •Oversimplification •Overgeneralization •Sweeping statements	**Thoughtfulness** (Ideas/Content) •Simplistic, naive •Conceptual confusion •Context, if present, drawn (or copied) from the preamble on the exam •Unfocused – drifts away from the topic •Wanders from issue •Simple assertions with little support •Few facts •Lack of logic •If reasons are provided, the reasons are unrelated to the issue •Weak links between case studies and arguments (if argument is presented) •Much extraneous material
Effectiveness •Coherent, methodical, and conventional •Methodically but mechanically ordered •Clear •Attempt to link argument and examples/case studies •Wordy rather than succinct •Imprecise and generalized diction (some, many, all, thing, he/him/they, stuff), and overuse of pronouns •No voice •Inconsistent tone	**Effectiveness** •Lack coherence •Blocked – each component is covered but there are no links •Not unified essays •Plodding •Extraneous material detracts •Detached voice: "I think" but no sense of the person behind the "I" •Mechanical and toneless •Lacks conviction •Inconsistent tone •Imprecise diction. Very few, if any, social studies terms
Correctness *Content* •Hit and miss, uneven; e.g., one accurate case study, one inaccurate •General lack of precision; correctness threatened by overgeneralization and lack of development *Conventions* •OK. Some errors, but errors are not intrusive	**Correctness** *Content* •Surprising dearth of social studies content •Weak case studies •Many glaring errors, demonstrating restricted understanding of content *Conventions* •Errors common •Little social studies vocabulary •Imprecise diction •Reader has to supply meaning

*1990 Satisfactory (3) papers in all respects were significantly better than the 1984 Satisfactory (3) papers.

Table 3

Satisfactory (3) Papers in English 33*

Key Features of 1990 Satisfactory (3) Papers	Key Features of 1984** Satisfactory (3) Papers
Thoughtfulness •Focused on a unifying idea •Conventional, sometimes clichéd interpretation of the literary selection on the exam •Thoughts expressed, however superficial, are clear •Personal experiences used to illustrate the main idea closely parallel those in the selection •Examples from other literature are not fully developed but are relevant •Examples from the reading selection are used literally as part of retelling •Complexities and subtleties avoided •Sweeping generalizations, use of stereotypes •Lack of developed support •Gaps in logic and information	**Thoughtfulness** •Superficial, unfocused, and too short for the development of a main idea •Understanding of the question but lack of depth •Details are either absent OR extraneous or insignificant •Rare "glimmers" of insight are not sustained •The writer's opinions and beliefs are asserted without qualification or support
Effectiveness •Writers do what the assignment directs them to do •Generally organized and coherent •Simple but clear transitions •Understandable but imprecise diction: overuse of general words, pronouns; e.g., "things", "stuff" •Some awareness of style but little control of style for effect •Personal, frank, conversational tone •Colloquial language, rhythms of speech •Voice is present •Weak recognition of audience	**Effectiveness** •Organized according to the assignment suggestions •Papers are short and uncomplicated •Simple chronology is the most common organizational structure •Language is understandable but not used for effect •Clichés, imprecise diction •Honest, sincere tone •Voice is present
Correctness *Content* •Some literary misinterpretation or careless reading •Generalized and superficial understanding *Conventions* •Mechanics and spelling are either correct but simple (few risks reduce potential for error) OR are frequently incorrect and reduce clarity of communication •Simple sentences •Predictable punctuation and spelling errors; e.g., comma splice, homonyms, "alot"	**Correctness** *Content* •Some misinformation. However, the assignment required no literary interpretation or understanding *Conventions* •Few risks in very short papers; consequently, few errors but the proportion of error to length and complexity of the paper is noticeable and jarring •Errors are predictable

*The 1990 Satisfactory (3) papers were generally more complex, more thoughtful, and more controlled than the 1984 papers.

**Note that the 1984 assignment was considerably less difficult than the 1990 assignment. (See Appendix B)

Table 4

Excellent (5) Papers in English 30*

Key Features of 1990 Excellent (5) Papers	Key Features of 1984 Excellent (5) Papers
Thoughtfulness •Original, thoughtful, and defensible literary interpretations that reveal an understanding of author's purpose and the subtleties of literature. Ideas belong to the writer •Personal opinions discussed logically and with substantial, relevant support •These writers make the assignment and theme their own •Writers question and illustrate, value and seek out irony, ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox •Write about ideas and use details as support •Writers give the impression that they do not merely read the literature but that they live it	**Thoughtfulness** •Absence of a unifying idea, OR a weak thesis that is discarded after the opening •Indication of understanding of the task but no "ownership" of task or material •Little supporting detail •Skewed literary interpretations that focus on irrelevant or erroneous details •Didactic and moralistic interpretations of literature •When interpretations are defensible, they are predictable and conventional
Effectiveness •Varied approaches to organization •Organization, deceptively simple, is actually quite complex but unobtrusive •Fluent structure, language, and integration of support (e.g., embedded quotations) •Precise, purposeful choices of diction and syntax •Personal but philosophical voice that suggests a sincere appreciation of the literature, a sense of wonder, and humility •Absence of pretension •Confident but unassertive tone •A dialogue with the reader •Awareness of and respect for audience	**Effectiveness** •Lack of appreciation of sublety •General and repetitious ** •Organization is taken from the assignment** •Coherent but not focused on a unifying idea •Confident but moralizing or didactic tone •Assertive tone •Lack of voice •Not fluent. Uneven control of syntax. Simple chaining of sentences: this, then, that, and then •Inflated diction that leaves the reader uncomfortable
Correctness *Content* •Accuracy is never in question •Correctly used quotations •Defensible and original interpretations supported with significant detail *Conventions* •An impressive absence of error especially in light of the complexity of the discussion and the circumstances of the writing	**Correctness** *Content* •Literary interpretations are skewed and often not defensible •Details, when present, are often erroneous *Conventions* •Generally correct spelling and punctuation •Fused sentences and comma splices

*The 1990 Excellent (5) papers were dramatically superior to their 1984 counterparts, despite considerably more demanding standards. The 1984 Excellent (5) papers were more like the 1990 Satisfactory (3) papers than like the 1990 Excellent (5) papers.

**These features of the 1984 papers may have been caused by the assignment itself.

Table 5

Excellent (5) Papers in Social Studies 30*

Key Features of 1990 Excellent (5) Papers	Key Features of 1984 Excellent (5) Papers
Thoughtfulness •Thorough and insightful •Demonstrate insight: producing knowledge, not reproducing memory work •Understand the issue in depth; rely on substance to persuade •Both breadth and depth •Analyse and apply – use philosophy, knowledge of the past to explain the present and predict the future •Speculative •The writer teaches the reader •Evaluate rather than pass moral judgments •Do not reduce issues to absolute •Pragmatic – balance theory and practice. Go back and forth; connect theory and theoretical discussions to the real world •Grounded in the real world – THE STUDENT UNDERSTANDS (and seems to care about) the connection between the question and their lives •Acknowledge personal biases •Express conviction, sometimes passion, but support with logic	**Thoughtfulness** •Thorough but not particularly insightful •Some simplistic elements and comments; extraneous personal impressions •Appropriate case studies and some specific detail •Conventional defence •Lack critical thinking •Lack problem-solving approach •Raise more questions than answers •Reproduce, rather than use, knowledge to teach or to convince the reader of a particular view •Understand there is an issue but attempt to resolve it by reviewing a case study and passing judgment rather than developing a thoughtful position
Effectiveness •Focused – well organized •Ideas, arguments, examples are linked •Clear transitions •Controlled, do not wander •Little waste, little extraneous material or verbiage, concise •Establish clear context for discussion •Assured voice but formal tone •Sense of audience •Convincing and persuasive. The writer owns the ideas and has conviction	**Effectiveness** •Weakly focused and not unified •Rambling and lacking coherence •Repetitive •Unlinked – separate chunks •Unclear or absent transitions •Hard to follow train of thought •Forced, ponderous, cumbersome arguments ** •Follow the steps in the assignment and "drags" the reader along ** •Lack conviction •Uncertain tone/voice
Correctness *Content* •Incorporate information from outside classroom – current affairs. Richness of information. Almost error free; minor errors do not weaken argument *Conventions* •Few errors, precise vocabulary, complex sentences, strong transitions	**Correctness** *Content* •Case studies are general but usually correct *Conventions* •Reader has to work harder to decide what the writer intended •Good spelling and vocabulary •Good sentence construction

*The 1990 Excellent (5) papers were substantially better than their 1984 counterparts, particularly with respect to integration of content as a means of discussing the issue.

**These features of 1984 papers may have been caused by the assignment.

Table 6

Excellent (5) Papers in English 33*

Key Features of 1990 Excellent (5) Papers	Key Features of 1984 Excellent (5) Papers
Thoughtfulness •Insightful and mature ideas sustained throughout •Clear thesis or main idea supported by thoughtful interpretation and significant understanding of the selection on the exam •Acknowledgment of the complexity of the author's theme •Personal experiences used as illustration enhance the writer's ideas •Thought moves from the personal to the universal •Conclusions are reflective rather than summarized •The writing explores ideas and emotions	**Thoughtfulness** •Coherent •Convincing personal insight •Some supporting detail but not usually enough to establish depth of thought •Some attempts at complexity that are not always entirely successful
Effectiveness •Organic, flowing organization •Coherent throughout •Transitions of idea rather than simple mechanical transitions •Precise, mature diction. Words chosen for connotative value •Images and figures of speech •Clear, direct, confident, and strong voice •Consistent tone – personal but sophisticated	**Effectiveness** •Coherent, controlled organization •Personal, sincere tone •Clear, confident voice •Precise diction and often effective word choice •Images and figures of speech
Correctness *Content* •Accurate interpretation that goes beyond the conventional *Conventions* •Control ranges from perfection in some papers to minor errors in others •Errors appear to result from attempts at more complex structures. Such errors do not interfere with clarity •Varied sentence structure •Correctly used quotations	**Correctness** *Content* •Essentially correct (although there was little requirement for content other than personal experience) *Conventions* •Generally correct use of language with occasional errors •Varied sentence structure •Correct punctuation •Correct use of dialogue

*The 1990 Excellent (5) papers were more substantial and perhaps more uniformly strong than were the 1984 Excellent (5) papers. The 1990 assignment demanded more of students but at the same time *may* have provided more scope for thoughtful work.

Conclusions

The two questions that guided the study,

i. Did students who wrote diploma examinations in June 1990 produce better compositions than did their 1984 counterparts?

ii. Have the standards of expectation for written responses at the *Satisfactory* (3) and *Excellent* (5) levels of performance changed since 1984?

were both answered in the affirmative. In all three subjects, the 1990 students at the midpoint and top levels of performance produced better writing than did their 1984 counterparts.

The most dramatic improvements were at the *Satisfactory* (3) level in Social Studies 30 and at the *Excellent* (5) level in English 30. In Social Studies 30, the teacher-readers concurred that the 1984 *Satisfactory* (3) papers were generally one level *below* the 1990 *Satisfactory* (3) papers in all respects. In other words, those 1984 papers would not have received passing grades by 1990 standards.

In English 30, the 1990 *Excellent* (5) papers were dramatically superior to their 1984 counterparts. The 1984 *Excellent* (5) papers had more in common with the 1990 *Satisfactory* (3) papers than with the 1990 *Excellent* (5) papers.

Similar but less dramatic improvements were noted in English 33. At both levels, the 1990 students produced more thoughtful, substantial, and coherent compositions than did their 1984 counterparts. This is particularly significant because the 1990

format and structure of the writing tasks have had an impact on students' work that cannot be measured. It was this variable that created difficulty in the 1987 (1988) quantitative study. It is quite possible that some of the problems with writing in 1984 were caused by the way in which the tasks were presented.

Teachers participating in the study theorized that among the factors contributing to improved student writing since 1984 are

- the positive inservice benefits, both formal and informal, of the centralized sessions for marking diploma examinations;
- a growing consensus among teachers about how to interpret curricular expectations;
- a greater emphasis on student writing in all subjects and at all grade levels;
- considerably more teaching of personal writing, of complex interpretations of content material, and of the writing process; and
- a significant increase in requirements for entrance to postsecondary institutions, which may contribute to students' motivation throughout their high school programs.

Given that assignments have become cognitively more challenging yet much more open-ended, and that standards have become more demanding and yet students' work has improved, one might conclude that classroom instruction that fosters critical thinking and clear, concrete expression of ideas has been the greatest factor in improved student writing.

The 1990 study, while acknowledging the assignment differences, attempted to describe generic features of the written responses to each assignment. No one can say how the 1984 students might have performed on the 1990 tasks. However, the remarkable similarities of performance features in the three subjects (each of which sets a significantly different task and assesses a very different program) suggest that, despite the assignment variable, there are consistent and identifiable ways in which students performing at a particular level approach a writing task.

Patterns of Thought ("States of Mind")

What emerged from this study that was unexpected, and perhaps more significant than the discovery of overall improvement in student writing, was a remarkably similar (sometimes identical) description of writing at each performance level in all three subjects. Teachers expected that because each subject was unique, and because each was reviewed separately, students' work would exhibit distinct and very different features. This was not the case. Students producing *Satisfactory* (3) work seem to take a similar approach regardless of subject or task. Features of *Excellent* (5) work were also similar from subject to subject.

These parallel patterns led the teacher-readers to conclude that at each level of performance, students have a describable stance toward the task and subject. For lack of a more

precise label, the teacher-readers referred to the stance and approach adopted by students at each level as a "state of mind."

Students producing *Satisfactory* (3) level writing in all three subjects shared the following characteristics with respect to their stance toward the task and subject:

- sincerity
- determination to do what has been asked
- methodical, mechanical approach
- conventional
- surface thought
  - lack depth of thought or internalization of idea
  - reluctance to explore
  - need to "nail things down" in concrete and black and white terms – a need for absolutes
  - no acknowledgment of ambivalence, dilemma, ambiguity, uncertainty, possibility, inconclusiveness, subtlety
- apparently no need to elaborate, explain, or develop
- judgmental and/or moralizing; perhaps moral judgment to these thinkers is a substitute for exploration of idea – it may justify the exercise
- generalized: language, idea, information
- inflated language, attempt to impress
- information is skewed or manipulated to fit a formula, form, or limited idea – not internalized or interpreted
- confident but not engaged
- trying to enter a relatively foreign world of thought and language without really having the keys. May rely on what seems to belong in that world (inflated language, for example) but that is not connected to the writer
- lack of ownership of idea and of language

Teacher-readers speculated that the absence of "ownership" is perhaps the most crucial feature of writing at this mid-point level. If instruction can encourage and develop independence of thought and internalization of ideas so that the ideas are meaningful to

the student, perhaps many of these students can move beyond this level.

In contrast, students producing *Excellent* (5) work seem to share the following stance or "state of mind" regarding their task and material:

- originality within a defensible context
- willing to take risks
- ownership of idea; writers are engaged with their ideas and the material
- aware of subtlety
- value and seek out irony, ambiguity, intricacy, logic, contradiction, ambivalence
- argue balanced positions: not only/but also; this/but that
- do not attempt to resolve or judge paradox or areas of grey, yet acknowledge and understand these complexities
- comfortable with exploring ideas in their complexity, not seeking narrow, literal, defined right answers
- confident but not assertive or brash
- ideas are the writer's own and have merit
- personal voice but not inappropriate; these writers speak as themselves and believe that their ideas merit discussion
- appreciative of the material
- apply knowledge, evaluate, analyse, and relate
- make connections for self and others
- work within a context
- do not seek absolute closure; comfortable with open-endedness, unfinished business

Teacher-readers concluded that the closer a student gets to the material, the more comfortable he or she becomes with ambiguity and complexity. The "easy" answers and absolutes seem to disappear and are replaced with exploration of ideas and comfort with open-endedness and unresolved problems. Students working at the top performance level seem to value their own ideas and have

confidence in the worth of those ideas. They do not try to replicate the ideas or language of others. Rather, they seem to have internalized the language of the discipline as well as the ideas that come from the material with which they are working, and they express themselves clearly and thoughtfully in their own voices. Teacher-readers concurred that the top level of writing in all three subjects is impressive in every respect. It truly commands the respect, and frequently the awe, of readers.

If teachers are more aware of these generalizable features of students' writing and students' stances toward the material about which they write, perhaps instruction can be adapted more directly in order to influence students' writing performance.

The Student Evaluation Branch staff hopes that studies such as this one provide useful information in support of classroom instruction and that such studies add to our understanding of how students write.

APPENDIX A

Summary of Written-Response Results

1984 and 1990

COMPARISON OF WRITTEN-RESPONSE SCORES, JUNE 1984 and 1990
ENGLISH 30

Number of Students	*Mean*
1984 - 12,186	*30.9/50*
1990 - 13,506	*31.3/50*

% Distribution of Scores

SCORING CATEGORY	(5) EXCELLENT	(4) PROFICIENT	(3) SATISFACTORY	TOTAL SATISFACTORY OR BETTER	(2) LIMITED	(1) POOR	(0) INS.
1. Total Impression							
1984	2.9	21.0	53.9	77.8	19.9	1.7	0.8
1990	2.8	18.3	55.3	76.4	22.1	1.2	0.3
2. Thought and Detail							
1984	3.1	20.0	47.0	70.1	26.6	2.5	0.8
1990	2.7	19.9	45.4	68.0	30.2	2.4	0.3
3. Organization							
1984	3.1	22.7	55.4	81.2	17.0	1.0	0.8
1990	2.8	20.0	60.4	83.2**	15.8	0.8	0.3
4. Matters of Choice							
1984	4.1	26.0	55.4	85.5	12.3	1.4	0.8
1990	3.4	23.4	59.0	85.7	13.0	1.0	0.3
5. Matters of Convention							
1984	6.0	35.8	45.6	87.5	10.1	1.7	0.8
1990	5.2	31.0	50.1	86.3	12.2	1.2	0.3

COMMENTARY:

1. Comparisons must be made with caution since
   - the 1984 and 1990 populations are not identical. There were 1,320 more students writing English 30 in June 1990 than in June 1984. This increase is approximately the same as the June 1990 decrease in the English 33 population;
   - the 1984 and 1990 assignments are considerably different;
   - the school and social climates of 1984 and 1990 are different;
   - the standards embedded in the 1990 scoring criteria are more demanding than those in the 1984 scoring criteria, particularly in the categories Organization and Matters of Convention.
2. The fact that a greater percentage of June 1990 students achieved scores of *Satisfactory* or better in Organization** than did their 1984 counterparts represents a significant improvement in students' performance in that scoring category.

COMPARISON OF WRITTEN-RESPONSE SCORES, JUNE 1984 and 1990
ENGLISH 33

Number of Students *Mean*
1984 - 6,074 *31.7/50*
1990 - 4,589 *30.1/50*

% Distribution of Scores

SCORING CATEGORY	(5) EXCELLENT	(4) PROFICIENT	(3) SATISFACTORY	TOTAL SATISFACTORY OR BETTER	(2) LIMITED	(1) POOR	(0) INS.
1. Thought and Detail							
1984	1.7	22.6	58.5	82.8	14.9	1.7	0.7
1990	1.7	22.0	54.7	78.4	19.8	1.4	0.5
2. Organization							
1984	1.8	24.7	63.2	89.7	8.6	1.0	0.7
1990	1.5	22.7	61.2	85.4	13.3	0.8	0.5
3. Matters of Choice							
1984	2.6	23.8	59.2	85.6	12.0	1.8	0.7
1990	2.6	23.7	59.8	86.1	12.1	1.2	0.5
4. Matters of Convention							
1984	3.5	32.7	45.2	81.4	14.8	3.1	0.7
1990	3.6	29.0	49.4	82.0	15.1	2.4	0.5

COMMENTARY:

1. Comparisons must be made with caution since
   - the 1990 assignment is considerably more demanding than the one in 1984;
   - the standards embedded in the 1990 scoring criteria are more demanding than those of 1984;
   - the 1990 population dropped by 1,485 students, which could mean that some stronger students elected to take English 30.

COMPARISON OF WRITTEN-RESPONSE SCORES, JUNE 1984 and 1990
SOCIAL STUDIES 30

Number of Students	*Mean*
1984 - 9,769	*15.1/30*
1990 - 10,823	*16.1/30*

% Distribution of Scores

SCORING CATEGORY	(5) EXCELLENT	(4) PROFICIENT	(3) SATISFACTORY	TOTAL SATISFACTORY OR BETTER	(2) LIMITED	(1) POOR	(0) INS.
1. Explanation of Issue/ Values							
1984	1.4	10.9	31.7	44	35.7	18.8	1.6
1990	1.6*	10.6	33.4*	45.6*	35.9	17.9	0.6
2. Description of Action/ Case Studies							
1984	1.6	12.2	33.2	47	37	13.1	2.0
1990	2.2*	12.9*	38.4*	53.5*	36.9	9.1	0.5
3. Defence of Position							
1984	0.9	8.6	37.3	46.8	43.0	9.5	0.6
1990	2.0*	14.5*	44.9*	61.4*	34.1	4.2	0.2
4. Quality of Language							
1984	1.0	12.5	62.0	75.5	22.1	2.0	0.4
1990	2.3*	18.5*	60.4	81.2*	17.5	1.1	0.2

COMMENTARY:

1. Comparisons must be made with caution since
   - the June 1990 population is larger than June 1984 by 1,054 students;
   - the assignment has changed – the 1990 assignment leaves decision making to the student;
   - the school and social climates of 1984 and 1990 are different;
   - the standards embedded in the 1990 scoring criteria are somewhat more demanding than those in the 1984 scoring criteria.
2. Considerably more students are meeting the greater 1990 demands (see *).

APPENDIX B

Written-Response Assignments

1984 and 1990

ENGLISH 30 - JUNE 1984

Section II: Major Assignment (Suggested time: 90 - 105 minutes)

Many characters in literature, like the prince in Sill's poem "Opportunity," accept and overcome circumstances that threaten them. Others, like the craven in "Opportunity," avoid circumstances that threaten them. Still others, like the old man and the soldier in Hemingway's story "Old Man at the Bridge," are unable to control the way their lives are affected by circumstances, yet do their best to fulfil their responsibilities.

The Assignment

FROM THE LITERATURE YOU HAVE STUDIED IN YOUR SENIOR HIGH ENGLISH CLASSES, select TWO characters who are SIMILAR to ANY of the four characters from the story and poem presented in this examination. Briefly explain that similarity. Next, compare the ways in which the characters you have selected from your studies deal with the circumstances that confront them. In your comparison, explain the consequences of the actions chosen by each of your selected characters, and express your opinion about each character's choice of action.

Read the guidelines on page 13 before proceeding.

Guidelines for Writing

1. **FROM THE LITERATURE YOU HAVE STUDIED IN YOUR SENIOR HIGH ENGLISH CLASSES,** select any two characters whose reactions to circumstances are interesting to you, and between whom there are grounds for comparison. Be sure that the characters you select are comparable to characters from the readings. **Remember, a comparison may involve a discussion of both similarities and differences.**

2. The characters you choose may be from poems, films, short stories, plays, novels, or other literature you have studied in your high school English classes.

3. Decide how each of the characters selected from the literature you have studied reacts to circumstances. Decide what motivates each to react as he does.

4. Determine the consequences of the course of action each of your characters adopts.

5. Develop a supported opinion about the behavior of each of your characters.

6. Decide on an appropriate method of development for your composition. Organize your material so that your ideas will be illustrated with appropriate and effective supporting detail. (Caution: Do NOT present a plot summary.)

7. Proofread your work carefully.

ENGLISH 30 - JUNE 1990

MAJOR ASSIGNMENT: Literature Composition
(Suggested time: approximately 1½ to 2 hours)

Much literature examines individuals who, as a result of choice or circumstance, are outsiders within a society. The images in the excerpt from *The Wabeno Feast* offer one example of the experience of an outsider. One of the ideas that the author suggests in this excerpt is that failure to maintain ties with the group affects an individual's sense of identity.

Write a composition based on other literature you have studied in which the author examines the outsider. What idea does the author develop regarding the outsider? Support and develop your controlling idea by referring to specific details from the literature you have chosen.

Guidelines for Writing

- **CHOOSE** your selection from relevant short stories, novels, plays, poems, other literature, or films that you have studied in your high school English classes. You may choose to discuss more than one selection.
- **FOCUS** your composition on the topic. Provide only those details that support your controlling idea. You may wish to consider discussing the significance of the author's use of such elements as character development, setting, irony, contrast, conflict, imagery, symbol, etc.
- **ORGANIZE** your composition so that your ideas are clearly and coherently developed.

SOCIAL STUDIES 30 - JUNE 1984

TOPIC A

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Some governments believe that individual freedom should be restricted to accomplish national economic goals such as full employment. The Nazi government of Adolf Hitler and the Soviet government of Joseph Stalin during the 1930s provide examples of such governments. Other governments have attempted to maintain individual freedom while endeavoring to achieve important national economic goals. The American government that enacted Roosevelt's New Deal during the Great Depression provides an example of this approach.

Write an essay on the issue: **SHOULD THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT RESTRICT INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM DURING TIMES OF ECONOMIC DEPRESSION TO ACHIEVE FULL EMPLOYMENT?**

MARKING CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES

Your essay will be graded according to how well you do the following:

– Explain the issue by stating its importance and by describing two competing value positions underlying the issue.	(5 marks)
– Describe an action taken by a country other than Canada in dealing with the same issue, and evaluate both the effectiveness and the desirability of the action taken by this country. (Select an example from above or from your knowledge of social studies.)	(10 marks)
– State what position you would have Canada take on the issue and defend this position.	(10 marks)
Marks allotted to content of the essay	25 marks
Marks allotted to quality of language and expression	5 marks
TOTAL	30 marks

BE SURE TO INDICATE YOUR CHOICE OF TOPIC IN THE SPACE PROVIDED ON THE BACK COVER.

SOCIAL STUDIES 30 - JUNE 1990

TOPIC A

WRITTEN RESPONSE

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Some governments believe that as domestic and/or international economic conditions change, their own economic system must adapt to these changes. Other governments believe that their own economic system, under which they have traditionally operated, is best suited to meet changing conditions and therefore should not be altered.

SHOULD GOVERNMENTS BE PREPARED TO MAKE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES TO THEIR NATION'S ECONOMY?

In an essay, choose and defend a position on this issue.

SUGGESTION FOR WRITING:

Organize your essay in a manner that will best defend your position on the issue. The mark allocation described below is not intended to imply an organizational structure for your essay.

YOUR ESSAY WILL BE EVALUATED ON HOW WELL YOU:

Defend a position on this issue by using logical and persuasive arguments	10 marks
Identify and thoughtfully discuss alternative value positions underlying this issue	5 marks
Select and accurately develop one or more relevant examples or case studies drawn from your knowledge of social studies content in defending your position on this issue	10 marks
Communicate effectively on this issue by using appropriate vocabulary and organization, and correct conventions of language	5 marks
TOTAL MARKS FOR ESSAY	30 marks

BE SURE TO INDICATE YOUR CHOICE OF TOPIC ON THE BACK COVER.

SOCIAL STUDIES 30 - JUNE 1984

TOPIC B

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Some nations in the 20th century have used direct military action in an attempt to preserve or restore friendly governments. Allied action in Russia after the revolution and recent American involvement in Grenada provide examples. On other occasions, some nations have avoided direct military action. Examples of this are the British and French policies of non-intervention during the Spanish Civil War and the American policy toward the takeover in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Write an essay on the issue: **SHOULD CANADA PROVIDE SUPPORT TO A NATION THAT USES DIRECT MILITARY FORCE TO PRESERVE OR RESTORE A FRIENDLY GOVERNMENT?**

MARKING CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES

Your essay will be graded according to how well you do the following:

– Explain the issue by stating its importance and by describing two competing value positions underlying the issue.	(5 marks)
– Describe an action taken by a country other than Canada in dealing with the same issue, and evaluate both the effectiveness and the desirability of the action taken by this country. (Select an example from above or from your knowledge of social studies.)	(10 marks)
– State what position you would have Canada take on the issue and defend this position.	(10 marks)
Marks allotted to content of the essay	25 marks
Marks allotted to quality of language and expression	5 marks
TOTAL	30 marks

BE SURE TO INDICATE YOUR CHOICE OF TOPIC IN THE SPACE PROVIDED ON THE BACK COVER.

SOCIAL STUDIES 30 - JUNE 1990

TOPIC B

WRITTEN RESPONSE

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Throughout the 20th century, many nations have developed powerful weapons of mass destruction. Some people have argued that these weapons need to be increasingly potent and sophisticated in order to serve their purpose. Others have claimed that the development of these weapons has been misguided and wrong.

HAVE NATIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY BEEN JUSTIFIED IN DEVELOPING AND/OR USING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION?

In an essay, choose and defend a position on this issue.

SUGGESTION FOR WRITING:

Organize your essay in a manner that will best defend your position on the issue. The mark allocation described below is not intended to imply an organizational structure for your essay.

YOUR ESSAY WILL BE EVALUATED ON HOW WELL YOU:

Defend a position on this issue by using logical and persuasive arguments	10 marks
Identify and thoughtfully discuss alternative value positions underlying this issue	5 marks
Select and accurately develop one or more relevant examples or case studies drawn from your knowledge of social studies content in defending your position on this issue	10 marks
Communicate effectively on this issue by using appropriate vocabulary and organization, and correct conventions of language	5 marks
TOTAL MARKS FOR ESSAY	30 marks

BE SURE TO INDICATE YOUR CHOICE OF TOPIC ON THE BACK COVER.

ENGLISH 33 - JUNE 1984

Section I: Personal Response to Literature

Read the excerpt below and complete the assignment that follows.

from **REMEMBER ME**

The village was not far from the [military] camp. It stood on the northern slope of a gradual hill and looked down over a broad, sweeping valley, patchworked with tiny hedged farms. On the south side of the hill was a deep forest. Through this forest wandered a lane that led to the unit's lines. On the brow of the hill, facing each other across a road, stood two tiny churches.

It was Christmas Eve. There was a dance in the church hall. The girls of the village were already there, waiting for the soldiers to arrive. Old women bustled about the hall with refreshments they had brought. From the centre of the ceiling a great Christmas bell hung suspended by paper ribbons. The three-piece orchestra tuned their instruments. The flat, broken music of their tuning carried out on the still night air and mingled with the thin, delicate sound of the bell from the [other] church.

As the soldiers came along the path through the forest they heard the church bell, muffled and delicate in the distance, like music from an old-fashioned music-box. Overhead, through the naked, silent trees, some stars twinkled in the north. The air was crisp and exhilarating, and the men walked briskly in little groups, talking and laughing.

And then, suddenly, in a shimmer of magic silver out of the night, snow began to fall. A faint whisper crept through the forest and a soft confining weight seemed to press down upon the earth. The men stopped still and, unbelieving, looked up into the fine swirling mantle. Across the mind of every man swept the ecstatic memory of the snowlands of his beloved Canada. With a wild quickening blood-beat they shouted for joy.

"Yi-pee! Yi-pee!"

"Snow! Snow! Look! Feel it!"

They danced in the roadway; they turned their faces to the sky to catch the soft melting crystals on their faces; they even stuck out their tongues and tasted it. Mad, like drunken men, they continued on their way, reeling, singing, shouting, and their uproar rolled through the night. Villagers standing at the crossroads heard them and watched them approach, and, frightened, drew back from them.

"Canadians!" a woman snorted, and turned her child away from them. But the child, wild-eyed with curiosity, peeked around at the men.

In the dance hall the girls and old women heard their shouting and singing as they approached.

"The Canadians are coming!" someone shrieked.

"They're drunk. Hear them!"

. . . The night was half gone before the people realized that the Canadians were not drunk at all, but simply full of wild soaring spirit. Impossible for the [villagers], with their utter lack of emotionalism, to understand the wildness of the soldiers. Had anyone explained to them that there were on earth people to whom the miracle of falling snow brought a wild, unutterable happiness, they would have shaken their heads in complete mystification.[1]

Edward Meade

[1]mystification — bewilderment

ENGLISH 33 - JUNE 1984

Section I: Personal Response to Literature Assignment

Everyone experiences intense joy at various times in his or her life. People express their feelings of joy in different ways. Some show their joy as do the soldiers in *Remember Me;* others keep their feelings inside or react more quietly. **Describe an occasion when you experienced intense joy, and describe how you behaved on that occasion.** Give enough specific detail so that the reader can share your experiences and feelings.

Be sure that the answers to the following questions can be found in your writing:

- What was the occasion?
- Why did the occasion give you joy?
- How did your feelings of joy affect your behavior?
- How do you feel about the occasion now that you are able to look back on it?

Guidelines for Writing

You may present your ideas in any prose form that will make your writing interesting. For example, you might wish to present your ideas as a letter, a page from a journal, or a conversation. To develop your ideas you might wish to use description, anecdotes, definition, reason, examples, or any combination of these and other methods that would be suitable.

ENGLISH 33 - JUNE 1990

SECTION I: PERSONAL RESPONSE TO LITERATURE
(Suggested time: 75 minutes)

Read the excerpt from *Cat's Eye* and complete the assignment that follows.

from CAT'S EYE

This selection from Cat's Eye *by Canadian author Margaret Atwood is told from the perspective of a young girl growing up in Ontario in the 1940s.*

Boys pride themselves on their drab clothing, their drooping socks, their smeared and inky skin: dirt, for them, is almost as good as wounds. They work at acting like boys. They call each other by their last names, draw attention to any extra departures from cleanliness. "Hey, Robertson! Wipe off the snot!" "Who farted?" They punch one another on the arm, saying, "Got you!" "Got you back!" There always seem to be more of them in the room than there actually are.

My brother punches arms and makes remarks about smells like the rest of them, but he has a secret. He would never tell it to these other boys, because of the way they would laugh.

The secret is that he has a girlfriend. This girlfriend is so secret she doesn't even know about it herself. I'm the only one he's told, and I have been double-sworn not to tell anyone else. Even when we're alone I'm not allowed to refer to her by her name, only by her initials, which are B.W. My brother will sometimes murmur these initials when there are other people around, my parents for instance. When he says them he stares at me, waiting for me to nod or give some sign that I have heard and understood. He writes me notes in code, which he leaves where I'll find them, under my pillow, tucked into my top bureau drawer. When I translate these notes they turn out to be so unlike him, so lacking in invention, so moronic in fact, that I can hardly believe it: "Talked to B.W." "Saw HER today." He writes these notes in colored pencil, different colors, with exclamation marks. One night there's a freak early snowfall, and in the morning when I wake up and look out of my bedroom window there are the supercharged initials, etched in pee on the white ground, already melting.

I can see that this girlfriend is causing him some anguish, as well as excitement, but I can't understand why. I know who she is. Her real name is Bertha Watson. She hangs around with the older girls, up on the hill under the stunted fir trees. She has straight brown hair with bangs and she's of ordinary size. There's no magic about her that I can see, or any abnormality. I'd like to know how she's done it, this trick with my brother that's turned him into a stupider, more nervous identical twin of himself.

Knowing this secret, being the only one chosen to know, makes me feel important in a way. But it's a negative importance, it's the importance of a blank sheet of paper. I can know because I don't count. I feel singled out, but also bereft. Also protective of him, because for the first time in my life I feel responsible for him. He is at risk, and I have power over him. It occurs to me that I could tell on him, lay him open to derision; I have that choice. He is at my mercy and I don't want it. I want him back the way he was, unchanged, invincible.

The girlfriend doesn't last long. After a while nothing more is heard of her. My brother makes fun of me again, or ignores me; he's back in charge. He gets a chemistry set and does experiments down in the basement. As an obsession I prefer the chemistry set to the girlfriend. There are things stewing, horrible stinks, little sulfurous explosions,

Continued

amazing illusions. There's invisible writing that comes out when you hold the paper over a candle. You can make a hard-boiled egg rubbery so it will go into a milk bottle, although getting it out again is more difficult. *Turn Water to Blood*, the instructions say, *and Astound Your Friends*.

He still trades comic books, but effortlessly, absentmindedly. Because he cares less about them he makes better trades. The comic books pile up under his bed, stacks and stacks of them, but he seldom reads them any more when the other boys aren't around.

My brother exhausts the chemistry set. Now he has a star map, pinned to the wall of his room, and at night he turns out the lights and sits beside the darkened, open window, in the cold, with his maroon sweater pulled on over his pajamas, gazing skyward. He has a pair of my father's binoculars, which he's allowed to use as long as he keeps the strap around his neck so he won't drop them. What he really wants next is a telescope.

When he allows me to join him, and when he feels like talking, he teaches me new names, charts the reference points: Orion, the Bear, the Dragon, the Swan. These are constellations. Every one of them is made up of a huge number of stars, hundreds of times bigger and hotter than our own sun. These stars are light-years away, he says. We aren't really seeing them at all, we're just seeing the light they sent out years, hundreds of years, thousands of years ago. The stars are like echoes. I sit there in my flannelette pajamas, shivering, the back of my neck hurting from the upward tilt, squinting into the cold and the infinitely receding darkness, into the black caldron where the fiery stars boil and boil. His stars are different: they're wordless, they flame in an obliterating silence. I feel as if my body is dissolving and I am being drawn up and up, like thinning mist, into a vast emptying space.

"Arcturus," my brother says. It's a foreign word, one I don't know, but I know the tone of his voice: recognition, completion, something added to a set. I think of his jars of marbles in the spring, the way he dropped the marbles into the jar, one by one, counting. My brother is collecting again; he's collecting stars.

Margaret Atwood

THE ASSIGNMENT

The narrator in the excerpt from *Cat's Eye* observes that her brother's interests affect the way he behaves.

WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF BOYS' AND GIRLS' BEHAVIOR AS DESCRIBED BY THE NARRATOR?

In your writing you should

- consider the narrator's reaction to changes in her brother's behavior
- use your own experiences and/or observations of the behavior of boys and girls to support your opinion.

You may also refer to other literature you have studied.

Present your ideas in PROSE.

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SOCIAL STUDIES 30

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ENGLISH 33

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